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# Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with Regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in View of Their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders

Pope Benedict XVI - 2005

### Introduction

In continuity with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and, in particular, with the Decree “[Optatam totius](#)”<sup>(1)</sup> on priestly formation, the Congregation for Catholic Education has published various documents with the aim of promoting a suitable, integral formation of future priests, by offering guidelines and precise norms regarding its diverse aspects.<sup>(2)</sup> In the meantime, the 1990 Synod of Bishops also reflected on the formation of priests in the circumstances of the present day, with the intention of bringing to completion the doctrine of the Council on this theme and making it more explicit and effective in today’s world. Following this Synod, Pope John Paul II published the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation “[Pastores dabo vobis](#).”<sup>(3)</sup>

In light of this abundant teaching, the present Instruction does not intend to dwell on all questions in the area of affectivity and sexuality that require an attentive discernment during the entire period of formation. Rather, it contains norms concerning a specific question, made more urgent by the current situation, and that is: whether to admit to the seminary and to holy orders candidates who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies.

## **1. Affective Maturity and Spiritual Fatherhood**

According to the constant Tradition of the Church, only a baptized person of the male sex validly receives sacred ordination.<sup>(4)</sup> By means of the sacrament of orders, the Holy Spirit configures the candidate to Jesus Christ in a new and specific way: the priest, in fact, sacramentally represents Christ, the head, shepherd and spouse of the Church.<sup>(5)</sup> Because of this configuration to Christ, the entire life of the sacred minister must be animated by the gift of his whole person to the Church and by an authentic pastoral charity.<sup>(6)</sup>

The candidate to the ordained ministry, therefore, must reach affective maturity. Such maturity will allow him to relate correctly to both men and women, developing in him a true sense of spiritual fatherhood towards the Church community that will be entrusted to him.<sup>(7)</sup>

## **2. Homosexuality and the Ordained Ministry**

From the time of the Second Vatican Council until today, various documents of the Magisterium, and especially the Catechism of the Catholic Church, have confirmed the teaching of the Church on homosexuality. The Catechism distinguishes between homosexual acts and homosexual tendencies.

Regarding acts, it teaches that Sacred Scripture presents them as grave sins. The Tradition has constantly considered them as intrinsically immoral and contrary to the natural law. Consequently, under no circumstance can they be approved.

Deep-seated homosexual tendencies, which are found in a number of men and women, are also objectively disordered and, for those same people, often constitute a trial. Such persons must be accepted with respect and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. They are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter.<sup>(8)</sup>

In the light of such teaching, this dicastery, in accord with the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, believes it necessary to state clearly that the Church, while profoundly respecting the persons in question<sup>(9)</sup>, cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called "gay culture."<sup>(10)</sup>

Such persons, in fact, find themselves in a situation that gravely hinders them from relating correctly to men and women. One must in no way overlook the negative consequences that can derive from the ordination of persons with deep-seated homosexual tendencies.

Different, however, would be the case in which one were dealing with homosexual tendencies that were only the expression of a transitory problem — for example, that of an adolescence not yet superseded. Nevertheless, such tendencies must be clearly overcome at least three years before ordination to the diaconate.

## **3. Discernment by the Church Concerning the Suitability of Candidates**

There are two inseparable elements in every priestly vocation: the free gift of God and the responsible freedom of the man. A vocation is a gift of divine grace, received through the Church, in the Church and for the service of the Church. In responding to the call of God, the man offers himself freely to him in love.<sup>(11)</sup> The desire alone to become a priest is not sufficient, and there does not exist a right to receive sacred ordination. It belongs to the Church — in her responsibility to define the necessary requirements for receiving the sacraments instituted by

Christ — to discern the suitability of him who desires to enter the seminary,<sup>(12)</sup> to accompany him during his years of formation, and to call him to holy orders if he is judged to possess the necessary qualities.<sup>(13)</sup>

The formation of the future priest must distinctly articulate, in an essentially complementary manner, the four dimensions of formation: human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral.<sup>(14)</sup> In this context, it is necessary to highlight the particular importance of human formation, as the necessary foundation of all formation.<sup>(15)</sup> In order to admit a candidate to ordination to the diaconate, the Church must verify, among other things, that the candidate has reached affective maturity.<sup>(16)</sup>

The call to orders is the personal responsibility of the bishop<sup>(17)</sup> or the major superior. Bearing in mind the opinion of those to whom he has entrusted the responsibility of formation, the bishop or major superior, before admitting the candidate to ordination, must arrive at a morally certain judgment on his qualities. In the case of a serious doubt in this regard, he must not admit him to ordination.<sup>(18)</sup>

The discernment of a vocation and of the maturity of the candidate is also a serious duty of the rector and of the other persons entrusted with the work of formation in the seminary. Before every ordination, the rector must express his own judgment on whether the qualities required by the Church are present in the candidate.<sup>(19)</sup>

In the discernment concerning the suitability for ordination, the spiritual director has an important task. Although he is bound to secrecy, he represents the Church in the internal forum. In his discussions with the candidate, the spiritual director must especially point out the demands of the Church concerning priestly chastity and the affective maturity that is characteristic of the priest, as well as help him to discern whether he has the necessary qualities.<sup>(20)</sup> The spiritual director has the obligation to evaluate all the qualities of the candidate's personality and to make sure that he does not present disturbances of a sexual nature, which are incompatible with the priesthood. If a candidate practices homosexuality or presents deep-seated homosexual tendencies, his spiritual director, as well as his confessor, have the duty to dissuade him in conscience from proceeding toward ordination.

It goes without saying that the candidate himself has the primary responsibility for his own formation.<sup>(21)</sup> He must offer himself trustingly to the discernment of the Church, of the bishop who calls him to orders, of the rector of the seminary, of his spiritual director and of the other seminary educators to whom the bishop or major superior has entrusted the task of forming future priests. It would be gravely dishonest for a candidate to hide his own homosexuality in order to proceed, despite everything, toward ordination. Such a deceitful attitude does not correspond to the spirit of truth, loyalty and openness that must characterize the personality of him who believes he is called to serve Christ and his Church in the ministerial priesthood.

## Conclusion

This Congregation reaffirms the need for bishops, major superiors and all relevant authorities to carry out an attentive discernment concerning the suitability of candidates for holy orders, from the time of admission to the seminary until ordination. This discernment must be done in light of a conception of the ministerial priesthood that is in accordance with the teaching of the Church.

Let bishops, episcopal conferences and major superiors look to see that the constant norms of this Instruction be faithfully observed for the good of the candidates themselves, and to guarantee that the Church always has suitable priests who are true shepherds according to the heart of Christ.

The Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI, on August 31, 2005, approved this present Instruction and ordered its publication.

Rome, November 4, 2005, Memorial of Saint Charles Borromeo, Patron of Seminaries.

ZENON Card. GROCHOLEWSKI  
Prefect

+ J. MICHAEL MILLER, C.S.B.  
Titular Archbishop of Vertara  
Secretary

1 SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on priestly formation [\*Optatam totius\*](#) (28 October 1965): AAS 58 (1966), 713-727.

2 Cf. CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, “*Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*” (6 January 1970; second edition 19 March 1985); The Study of Philosophy in Seminaries (20 January 1972); A Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy (11 April 1974); On the Teaching of Canon Law to Those Preparing to be Priests (2 April 1975); The Theological Formation of Future Priests (22 February 1976); “*Epistula circularis de formatione vocationum adularum*” (14 July 1976); Instruction on Liturgical Formation in Seminaries (3 June 1979); Circular Letter Concerning Some of the More Urgent Aspects of Spiritual Formation in Seminaries (6 January 1980); Educational Guidance in Human Love: Outlines for Sex Education (1 November 1983); Pastoral Care of People on the Move in the Formation of Future Priests (25 January 1986); Guide to the Training of Future Priests Concerning the Instruments of Social Communication (19 March 1986); Circular Letter Concerning Studies of the Oriental Churches (6 January 1987); The Virgin Mary in Intellectual and Spiritual Formation (25 March 1988); Guidelines for the Study and Teaching of the Church’s Social Doctrine in the Formation of Priests (30 December 1988); Instruction on the Study of the Fathers of the Church in the Formation of Priests (10 November 1989); Directives Concerning the Preparation of Seminary Educators (4 November 1993); Directives on the Formation of Seminarians Concerning Problems Related to Marriage and the Family (19 March 1995); Instruction to the Episcopal Conferences on the Admission to Seminary of Candidates Coming from Other Seminaries or Religious Families (9 October 1986 and 8 March 1996); The Propaedeutic Period (1 May 1998); Circular Letters Concerning the Canonical Norms relating to Irregularities and Impediments both “*ad Ordines recipiendos*” and “*ad Ordines exercendos*” (27 July 1992 and 2 February 1999).

3 POPE JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation “[\*Pastores dabo vobis\*](#)” (25 March 1992): AAS 84 (1992), 657-864.

4 Cf. e.Le., can. 1024 and e.e.E.O., can. 754; POPE JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter “[\*Ordinatio sacerdotalis\*](#)” on reserving priestly ordination to men alone (22 May 1994): AAS 86 (1994), 545-548.

5 Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on the ministry and life of priests “[\*Presbyterorum ordinis\*](#)” (1 December 1965), n. 2: AAS 58 (1966), 991-993; [\*Pastores dabo vobis\*](#), n. 16: AAS 84 (1992), 681-682. With regard to the priest’s configuration to Christ, bridegroom of the Church, “[\*Pastores dabo vobis\*](#)” states that “The priest is called to be the living image of Jesus Christ, the spouse of the Church. [...] In his spiritual life, therefore, he is called to live out Christ’s spousal love toward the Church, his bride. Therefore, the priest’s life ought to radiate this spousal character, which demands that he be a witness to Christ’s spousal love” (n. 22): AAS 84 (1992), 691.

6 Cf. “[\*Presbyterorum ordinis\*](#),” n. 14: AAS 58 (1966), 1013-1014; “[\*Pastores dabo vobis\*](#),” n. 23: AAS 84 (1992), 691-694.

7 Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests (31 March 1994), n. 58.

8 Cf. CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH (“editio typica,” 1997), nn. 2357-2358. Cf. also the various documents of the CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH: Declaration “*Persona humana*” on certain questions concerning sexual ethics (29 December 1975); Letter “*Homosexualitatis problema*” to the bishops of the Catholic Church on the pastoral care of homosexual persons (1 October 1986); Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legislative Proposals on Non-discrimination of Homosexual

Persons (23 July 1992); Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons (3 June 2003). With regard to homosexual inclinations, the Letter “Homosexualitatis problema” states that “Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder” (n. 3).

9 Cf. CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH (“editio typica,” 1997), n. 2358; cf. also c.I.c., can. 208 and C.C.E.O., can. 11.

10 Cf. CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, A memorandum to bishops seeking advice in matters concerning homosexuality and candidates for admission to Seminary (9 July 1985); [CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS, Letter \(16 May 2002\): Notitiae 38 \(2002\), 586.](#)

11 Cf. “[Pastores dabo vobis](#),” nn. 35-36: AAS 84 (1992), 714-718.

12 Cf. e.Le., can. 241, § 1: “A diocesan bishop is to admit to a major seminary only those who are judged qualified to dedicate themselves permanently to the sacred ministries; he is to consider their human, moral, spiritual, and intellectual qualities, their physical and psychic health, and their correct intention”; cf. e.e.E.O., can. 342, § 1.

13 Cf. “[Optatam totius](#),” n. 6: AAS 58 (1966), 717. Cf. also e.Le., can. 1029: “Only those are to be promoted to orders who, in the prudent judgment of their own bishop or of the competent major superior, all things considered, have integral faith, are moved by the right intention, have the requisite knowledge, possess a good reputation, and are endowed with integral morals and proven virtues and the other physical and psychic qualities in keeping with the order to be received”; cf. e.e.E.O., can. 758. Not to call to orders those who do not have the necessary qualities is not an unjust discrimination: cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legislative Proposals on Nondiscrimination of Homosexual Persons.

14 Cf. “[Pastores dabo vobis](#),” nn. 43-59: AAS 84 (1992), 731-762.

15 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 43: “The priest, who is called to be a ‘living image’ of Jesus Christ, head and shepherd of the Church, should seek to reflect in himself, as far as possible, the human perfection which shines forth in the incarnate Son of God and which is reflected with particular liveliness in his attitudes toward others”: AAS 84 (1992), 732.

16 Cf. *ibid.*, nn. 44 and 50: AAS 84 (1992), 733-736 and 746-748. Cf. also: CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS, Circular Letter to the Most Reverend Diocesan Bishops and Other Ordinaries with Canonical Faculties to Admit to Sacred Orders Concerning: Scrutinies regarding the Suitability of Candidates for Orders (10 November 1997): Notitiae 33 (1997), 507-518, particularly Enclosure V.

17 Cf. CONGREGATION FOR BISHOPS, Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops “*Apostolorum Successores*” (22 February 2004), n. 88.

18 Cf. e.Le., can. 1052, § 3: “If [...] the bishop doubts for specific reasons whether a candidate is suitable to receive orders, he is not to promote him.” Cf. also e.e.E.O., can. 770.

19 Cf. e.Le., can. 1051: “The following prescripts regarding the investigation about the qualities required in the one to be ordained are to be observed: [...] there is to be a testimonial of the rector of the seminary or house of formation about the qualities required to receive the order, that is, about the sound doctrine of the candidate, his genuine piety, good morals, and aptitude to exercise the ministry, as well as, after a properly executed inquiry, about his state of physical and psychic health.”

20 Cf. “[\*Pastores dabo vobis\*](#),” nn. 50 and 66: AAS 84 (1992), 746-748 and 772-774. Cf. also “*Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*,” n. 48.

21 Cf. “[\*Pastores dabo vobis\*](#),” n. 69: AAS 84 (1992), 778.

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